



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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THE INTERVIEW PAPER: A JUMP-START INTO DOCUMENTED WRITING

Most academic writing requires movement between the ideas, opinions, and words of the author and outside sources. Smoothing these transitions can challenge even experienced writers, so the fact that the task often frustrates—and at times defeats—those less experienced comes as no surprise. The interview paper serves as an easy first step into documented writing. Not only does it use a skill which students have already developed and practice on a daily basis—reporting conversation—but also it provides a link between school experiences and the “real” world.

The Assignment

The assignment should have an identifiable audience. In my English classes I sometimes ask students to write an article about an international student or an employee at the college; for these papers, the audience consists of students with whom the writers share many common interests. (When I read the final drafts, I select some of the best papers and submit them to the newspaper staff for consideration for publication. The students who have written pieces that are selected beam when their articles are published!) In some courses I require my pupils to write a paper on an occupation: they must write for individuals who might be considering employment in such a position or job (knowing for whom they are writing the paper helps students select an appropriate focus and relevant details), include material from an interview source in the paper, and use direct quotations from this source.

I begin the assignment with prewriting exercises. Students may write a journal entry about various people who have interesting jobs, writing a paragraph on each person and discussing what they would ask that person if they had the chance. Or the class may discuss the various aspects of a job that people would want to know about if they were considering it in a future career, or

they may discuss the most interesting aspects of the life of an international student. After the students have identified the individuals they will interview, together they create a list of potential questions to use when interviewing their sources. They discuss good approaches to take with people in a work situation, such as making the initial contact courteously, arriving at the correct time in the proper attire, keeping the interview on track, respecting the time and privacy of the person being interviewed, and following up after the appointment with written or verbal thanks. This information and their experiences with scheduling and interviewing will assist students later when they request help from someone in the business world or apply for jobs.

After students complete the interviews, the entire class has a workshop session. During this session, students discuss how they should go about writing their papers: what information to use; some possible organizational schemes; the material they must cite specifically and the information that qualifies as “common knowledge”; choosing information that should be paraphrased or should be quoted; how to use quotations to support general statements and where they could be used most effectively. This conversation leads into the mechanics of using quotations, paraphrasing information, and citing references.

Because students can visualize the person they interviewed, they instinctively realize the need to cite their source. When they begin to draft their papers, students find that their daily experiences conversing with others give them good ideas about how to use explanatory words with their quotations and paraphrases—e.g., “John says he...”; “Louise told me she...”; “According to Frank....”

Adaptation

English professors have the responsibility of teaching the basics of documented writing, but all disciplines require that students use outside sources and report on them. The interview paper offers opportunities in all disciplines to move students into academic writing in an unthreatening manner and to put students in contact with individuals who apply the particulars of a disci-



pline in their careers. For example, history students could interview veterans of wars, curators of historical museums, or workers at historical sites; political science students could collect information from government officials or politicians; science students could visit with pharmacists, medical personnel, or industrial scientists; physical education students could interview coaches, physical therapists, or professional athletes; students studying horticulture could interview nursery owners or landscape designers; and math students could talk with engineers, bankers, or bookkeepers.

Conclusion

The interview paper gives students experience writing papers requiring documentation. It gives them an opportunity to see practical applications of course material, offers occasions to talk to people in professions they may wish to pursue, and helps them learn and develop documentation techniques using skills they already possess. The assignment serves as a logical and valid first step into the realm of academic writing.

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